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AN AUTOGRAPH LETTER OF A PSEUDO-MESSIAH.

THE accompanying facsimile is reproduced from an original autograph letter of the Pseudo-Messiah Judah ben Shalom of Yemen, known as Mari Shooker Kohail. Although he is not as famous as Shabethai Sevi, still a letter of his may be of some interest to the Jewish public. I have tried to get other such letters, but can find none. The document consists of one leaf of paper, size $14 \times 8\frac{1}{2}$ inches, and, as it is very clear, I need not describe it in detail, but will confine myself to a few general remarks.

In all ages there have been pretenders and false messiahs amongst Jews, but in Yemen they have been very numerous, no doubt because the Yemen Jew is credulous and lacks erudition. His studies are principally confined to the Zohar and books on קבלה "Cabbala," סגולות "cabbalistic practices," רפואות "cures," גורלות "casting of lots," and קמיעות "talismans." Many of them shut themselves up for days, and imagine that they are speaking to the angel Gabriel and other celestial beings. I knew a Yemenite some years ago who was studying the cabbalistic meaning of the צורת המנורה (the design of the seven-branched candlestick), and after a while he told everybody that he had dreamt of wonderful things, and that he had had visions! Another incident which took place not long ago, and is characteristic of the rôle ascribed to Yemenites, occurred to a man in the East who was unwell for some time past, and got a Yemenite to see him. This clever doctor, with an eye to the main chance, told his patient that he would have to make a sacrifice of gold to the angel who was following him (the patient), in order to propitiate him, and that he must

ישמע חכם ויוסף לקח וגבון תזכורות יקנה למרבה המשרה ולשלום
אין קץ על כסא דוד ועל ממלכתו להכין יאותה ולסעדה במשפט
ובצדקה מעתה ועד עולם קנאת יצ צבאות תעשה זאת פי צדיק יהגה
חכמה ולשונו תדבר משפט פרי צדיק עץ חיים ולוקח נפשות חכם
שיטר לנבח יבטו ועפעפיך יישירו נגיד חכם לב יקח מצות ואמר
שפתים ילבט



have the cash beforehand, while the account would be rendered later on. This man was given the money he asked for, and he retired into a room in the house of the patient, and after two or three days he came out, and on being asked for the "Angel's account," he replied that the "Shed" snatched the bill away from him, and as he relied on the bill, he could not remember the items! Another specimen of their taste is the supplement of a short incantation for nullifying the influence of magic and evil thoughts (סגולה לביטול הכשף והרהורים רעים), at the end of a MS. of the rules of Sheḥita, in my possession. The well-known traveller, Jacob Saphir, describes in his book their superstitious beliefs and practices, and characterizes them with the words, זאת ריעת אחינו בארץ הזאת וזה מנת, "these are the ideas of our brethren in this land, and this is their lot¹."

Mari Shalom Kohail, the subject of this article, was, according to Saphir², one of the learned men of Ṣanaa, conversant in Zohar, Cabbala, &c., and potter by profession. According to another traveller³ he was a cobbler. One day he suddenly declared to the people that he was the Messiah, and asked them to repent for their sins, as the deliverance of the Jews was nigh. The Arabs, however, he informed that he was a Mohammedan, and that he was sent to announce the speedy appearance of the Mahdi⁴ on Mount Paran⁵. He maintained that the word in Isaiah xlv. 1, למשיחו לכורש, "to his anointed, to Cyrus," was a mistake, and it should be למשיחו לשוכר, "to His anointed, to Shooker⁶." He gradually succeeded in getting nearly all the Jews of Yemen and a large number of Arabs to

¹ *Eben Saphir*, vol. I, pp. צה, עז.

² Vol. II, p. קמז.

³ מסעות שלמה, Vienna, 1884, p. 13.

⁴ מסעות שלמה, p. 13, has Mohammed.

⁵ According to a Mohammedan conception, which is often expressed in the polemical literature, the three mountains in Deut. xxxiii. 2 (Sinai, Seir, and Paran) refer to the successive revelations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

⁶ *Eben Saphir*, vol. II, p. קנא.

follow him¹. The Jews of Aden denuded their synagogue of treasure and sent it to him, and he also received large sums of money from the people in other countries. He wrote a letter to the late D. J. Ezra of Calcutta, commanding him to pay him a tithe (מעשר) of all his possessions, which were reputed to be fifty million francs²! This messiah, after wandering for some years and preaching his gospel, went south, and was finally killed by some Arabs who had found him out³.

The letter was found among our family papers in Bombay a few months ago. It is preceded by five Biblical verses of a messianic character which the writer obviously applies to himself. These messianic pretensions also explain the words, "May his glory be high and his kingdom be exalted," and also the letters קש on his seal, which cannot mean anything but קדוש שמים "the holy of the heavens⁴." According to Saphir, he called himself משיח בן דוד⁵.

The letter itself begins with a few rhymed sentences in Aramaic, probably owing to cabbalistic influence. The letter is addressed to Moses Hanoth ha-Levi, in reply to a letter which the messianic pretender received from him. He states that he answers this letter only out of consideration for the writer; but he will not pay any attention to the other people who, in reply to his petitions for money, wrote asking him to perform miracles, and also to send the replies by a bird, things which he could not do then, having no permission from his lord Elijah, and being altogether forbidden by God to perform miracles. It seems he had previously written a letter to Moses Hanoth ha-Levi asking him for money to build the Temple at Jerusalem. He asks for a loan of 1,000 "Reals," and begs to be informed how much money had been collected previously by his representatives in India. At the end of the letter there are three seals: one on the right, with

¹ *Eben Saphir*, vol. II, p. קב.

² מסעות שלמה, p. 12.

³ *Eben Saphir*, vol. II, p. קא.

⁴ Dan. iv. 10, 20.

⁵ *Eben Saphir*, vol. II, p. קא.

the words שלום קש יצו; the second one, on the left, is in Arabic but illegible; and the one in the centre has a "Magen David" surrounded by some mystical letters.

TRANSLATION.

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels (Prov. i. 5). Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this (Isaiah ix. 6). The mouth of the righteous speaketh wisdom, and his tongue talketh of judgment (Ps. xxxvii. 30). The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life; and he that winneth souls is wise (Prov. xi. 30). Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee (Prov. iv. 25). The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall (Prov. x. 8).

A voice of voices, issuing decrees, peace from the heavens on high, and peace from the Ancient of days (Dan. vii. 13, 22), and peace from the angels which surround the throne (Dan. vii. 9), and peace from the wheels (Dan. vii. 9) and from the Cherubs, peace from the sun and the moon and the stars, and peace from the four winds of the world to the man who is dignified in name and glory, son of the holy ones, stock of venerable people, an off-shoot of deep-rooted people, a plant of faithful people, the learned, the beloved, the lord the master and the pleasant, our honoured and learned Rabbi Moses Ḥanoch ha-Levi¹, may the Lord preserve him and keep alive (Ps. xli. 3), (from) his well-wisher Judah ben Shalom, may his glory be high² and his kingdom be exalted³ (Num. xxiv. 7), may God be his aid. Amen. May such be his will. After inquiries for your welfare, we inform your elevated highness that the messenger you sent, who is Mulla⁴ Abraham b. Meshullam el-Sharḥabi⁵, may his

¹ He came from Turkey to Ṣanāʾa when he was quite young, and thence to India, where he was prosperous in his business. Afterwards he settled in Aden, where he accomplished much good, and distributed Hebrew books all over Yemen. He was the first to supply the Yemenites with Hebrew books from Europe and especially from Russia and Leghorn. In his old age he went to Jerusalem, and after a time died there.

² ירום הדור = ירָה.

³ הונשא מלכותו = הוֹלֵל.

⁴ A term of respect for a learned man in Yemen and Persia.

⁵ שרעב, a town in Yemen: vide *Yacut*, III, p. 275.

Rock and Redeemer protect him, arrived here on Friday the 29th day of the month of Nisan (5)630 A. M. (1870), with letters from thee and the prince Hacham Zalman¹ and from the lord Obadiah (Sir Albert) David Sassoon, and from the lord Rabbi Yahya² Mizrahi³, may the Lord preserve him and keep him alive (Ps. xli. 3), and two letters from the Holy Land, may it be built and established early in our time, Amen. We read them and were pleased with them, but we saw that the messenger does not practise what he preaches, and it is only for your sake that I am sending you an answer. As regards the reply to the above-mentioned gentlemen, I will send them a reply when my lord Elijah, may he be remembered for good, will give me permission to (do so), for they have asked me to perform signs and wonders and to send them my replies by a flying bird. But I have no power at present to do anything, nor make use of any Holy Name, because God, may he be blessed, has forbidden me, and now if I do perform a sign or a wonder there may be, God forbid, trouble to Israel. But be informed and inform, that the time of the salvation is near, and thine eyes shall see miracles. With regard to what you mentioned (in your letter), about the building (of the Temple), know thou, my brother and the beloved of my soul, that shortly we will all go up to Zion and will all be glad and rejoice in the building of the Chosen House. As to what Rabbi Jacob Saphir wrote in his letter⁴, that the Messiah is going to appear in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, (Lishcath Hagazith) surely there is no Beth Din sitting there, and not only that, but the Mosque (of Omar), may it be destroyed and be covered with rust⁵, is built thereon; and all that Rabbi Simon bar Yohai,

¹ Hacham Zalman came to Bombay as שליח כולל, collector for a fund in Jerusalem. Sir Albert Sassoon kept him in his house for two or three years, after which he returned to Jerusalem, whence he paid frequent visits to India. He was a master of the art of microscopic calligraphy. I saw the verse Deut. viii. 8 written by him on a grain of wheat. His son, who was the reader of the Shanghai synagogue for six or seven years, left about twelve years ago for San Francisco, where he became a שוחט. Hacham Zalman was the grandson of the "Rav," Rabbi Shneor Zalman of Liadi (Russia) who was the author of תניא and was known as the Saddik of a sect of Hassidim called חזק (הכמה בינה רעה). Comp. Graetz, *History of the Jews*, V, 416 sq. ² Arabic for Zechariah.

³ Probably the Mizrahi mentioned in מסעוד שלמה, p. 14, who seems to have become one of his many followers. He lived in Egypt.

⁴ Jacob Saphir twice distributed circular letters, which he called "אגרת הימן" and "אגרת הימן השנית" respectively, among the Jews, warning them against following the false Messiah. Vide *Eben Saphir*, vol. II, pp. קנ, קנב.

⁵ יִשְׁתָּב ויִצְמַי = ירוחב ויצמי. ⁶ instead of ר is due to assimilation.

peace be unto him, said, was about the world above, and he who is wise will understand (Dan. xii. 10). And I may mention unto thee, my brother, about thy messenger Mulla Abraham the above-mentioned, that a quarrel arose between him and Israel Judah ha-Cohen in the town of El-Ṭawila, and they beat one another and were wounded, and the king arrested them, and the king imprisoned them for about ten days. After that I went to the king and got them released. I will also ask thee : why dost thou send me messengers who are not God-fearing ? I am surprised at you, but for your sake I am sending this reply through him. I will furthermore remind the beloved of my soul, to send a letter to the prince and the lord Obadiah David Sassoon, may the lord preserve him and keep him alive (Ps. xli. 3), and also to the learned lord Yahya Mizrahi, may the lord preserve him and keep him alive (Ps. xli. 3), that thou and they give me one thousand "Reals"¹ as a loan, and by the help of God, may he be blessed, I will pay it back to you shortly. And this letter which I have sent is closed and sealed, lest they open it on the way. I beg you, my brother, not to delay (fulfilling) what we have reminded you (to do), and let me know by letter as to how many "Reals" you have given into the hand of Mulla Solaiman El-Ḥazi, may the Lord preserve him and keep him alive (Ps. xli. 3), and Salem El-Ḥarazi, may the Lord preserve him and keep him alive (Ps. xli. 3). And thus peace be unto thee, and peace unto the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, peace be unto them. And it was written here the town of El-Ḳaraje, may it be destroyed and be covered with rust², and may Jerusalem be built and established soon in our time. Amen. Wednesday, the 17th day of the month of Iyyar in (5)630 A. M. (1870).

Your well-wisher, MARI³ SHOOKER⁴ KOḤAIL, may his honour be exalted.

(L.S.)

(L.S.)

(L.S.)

DAVID S. SASSOON.

¹ רֵאָל = "Real," Maria Theresa dollar. Comp. *Geschichte des Maria-Theresien-Thalers*, Wien, 1898, p. 134.

² See note 5, p. 166.

³ A term of respect for a learned man in Yemen.

⁴ Arabic for Judah.